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Politicians dominate the airwaves during disaster

By Annie Linskey, The Baltimore Sun

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Live from the Maryland Emergency Management Agency headquarters in Reisterstown in recent days: a calm, confident and casually dressed Gov. Martin O'Malley issuing hour-by-hour reports about Hurricane Irene.

He predicted a "monster storm." He urged Ocean City residents to evacuate. He announced the closure of the Bay Bridge. And, against a backdrop of in-motion weather maps and scurrying, uniformed officials, he made his debut appearance on NBC's "Meet the Press," the gold-standard of network Sunday political shows.

The storm clouds that dumped inches of water on the state over the weekend included a silver lining of sorts for Maryland's politicians — a chance to show off leadership styles amid wall-to-wall local coverage and even gain some national exposure.

Natural disasters "can be a real asset" for leaders who are prepared, said Jennifer Duffy, with the nonpartisan Cook Political Report. "They can lift your stature. They can lift your approval rating." Conversely, they can be career-enders for those who are unresponsive or seem out of touch.

Over the weekend, the spotlight didn't just shine on O'Malley, a Democrat who is term-limited and seeking to develop a national profile. Hurricane Irene made its way into political talk emanating from the White House, from governors' mansions along the East Coast and even from the Baltimore city mayor's race.

New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, a Republican, dominated cable shows because of his blunt warning that vacationers needed to "get the hell off the beach." In New York, Mayor Michael Bloomberg, an Independent, captured national attention for his decision to evacuate parts of Lower Manhattan.

So far, Hurricane Irene hasn't washed away any political careers, but that too can be a threat. Just ask former Louisiana Gov. Kathleen B. Blanco. The Democratic governor was two years into her first term when Hurricane Katrina came ashore and devastated large swaths of her state. Blanco shouldered some of the blame for the inadequate response and ultimately decided not to seek re-election.

On Sunday, O'Malley was one of several governors on "Meet the Press." Maryland's governor gave a standard state-of-the-state update and then unleashed a political shot, praising the Obama administration's preparation for this storm over President George W. Bush's response to Katrina.

"This is a much better FEMA than the olden days," O'Malley said, referring to the Federal Emergency Management
NBC host David Gregory immediately picked up on the reference to Hurricane Katrina: "The olden days are not that olden," he said. "About six years ago."

"That is right," O'Malley replied.

Virginia Gov. Robert McDonnell, a Republican, was the next guest. Christie, of New Jersey, was also on the show.

(Oddly enough, Maryland's governor managed to eclipse his own national "Meet the Press" debut: WBAL, the local NBC affiliate, aired live coverage of an O'Malley storm briefing, which bumped "Meet the Press" out of its usual 10 a.m. time slot.)

O'Malley wasn't the only politician to bring up Katrina. On Monday, the White House issued a news release commemorating the sixth anniversary of that storm. "When it comes to disaster response, we've worked very seriously to enhance our preparedness efforts," Obama said in a statement.

The president then pivoted to Hurricane Irene, saying that "before the storm made landfall" his administration pre-positioned staff and resources.

On the local news, another lawmaker to benefit from significant airtime was Lt. Gov. Anthony Brown, a likely gubernatorial candidate in 2014.

Brown appeared by O'Malley's side during multiple news briefings from MEMA and on Sunday took a tour of the storm damage via a Black Hawk helicopter.

"People want to know that their elected officials are working hard," said Brown in a telephone interview. "We certainly didn't call for the formation of Hurricane Irene. We knew that we had to step up to the challenge."

During the response to the twin snowstorms of February 2010, O'Malley delivered solo briefings. (He earned national attention during that disaster too, appearing on "PBS NewsHour.") Political observers speculated that the governor had good reason to share the credit this time.

"O'Malley is not insensitive to the fact that Brown has a political future beyond being his lieutenant governor," said Trevor Parry-Giles, a professor of political communication at the University of Maryland.

Boosting Brown is one way that O'Malley can "help maximize his legacy," Parry-Giles said.

Comptroller Peter Franchot, another potential 2014 gubernatorial candidate for the Democratic ticket, put out a statements complimenting O'Malley's leadership during the storm. And Attorney General Douglas F. Gansler, who also might run in the 2014 Democratic primary, issued two news releases warning of hurricane-related fraud and a third offering preparation tips.

Government response to the storm included some gaffes — including one by Baltimore Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake, a Democrat who faces a crowded primary field next month. She recorded a phone message urging residents to stock up on food and supplies and, due to a technical malfunction, a slew of calls went out before the sun came up Saturday morning, waking city residents.

Primary challenger Otis Rolley seized on the call, issuing a news release Monday calling on the mayor to show how much public money was spent on it, the name of the vendor and what criteria the mayor used to determine which households received the call.

"We are constantly told we don't have enough money to meet our needs, while we have plenty of money for these robocalls," said Rolley in a statement. "It is critical for the mayor to immediately and fully detail who paid for these
calls and why they went out. Otherwise, it's just another example of taxpayer money being used to finance her campaign."

Keina Page, a spokeswoman for Rawlings-Blake's campaign called Rolley's questions "desperate" and said that Rolley "is saying anything at this point just to get attention."

Ryan O'Doherty, a spokesperson for Rawlings-Blake, said the calls were made via the city's "reverse 911" system and was gathering additional information about the cost.

Rawlings-Blake also frequently appeared on television newscasts, providing updates about Baltimore during the storm. From time to time, her hurricane response was interrupted by her own political ads promoting her handling of the 2010 snowstorms

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